

## **INUIT CULTURE ON BAFFIN ISLAND**

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### **SUMMARY**

I consider important the introduction of a human subject, so closely connected with everything natural, into naturalists' exploration. The same as making known man's constant struggle for adaptation to the natural environment in which he is born, grows and lives. Man was and is forced to create social standards with the aim of his and his descendants' survival. All his action and behaviour is called a culture that he creates in cooperation with the other human individuals in his group. In the example of the inhabitants of the Arctic, one of the most extreme territories, I want to point out the importance of a thorough knowledge and understanding of all the natural phenomena as the only possible pre-condition for further existence. Regarding the changed conditions of life in the present for these people it is impossible to maintain the experience acquired in the course of thousands of years and the social rules arising from it or their culture. They do not have sufficient education and technical possibilities and are not able to adapt themselves without somebody else's help. The others, who have affected this environment and culture by the expansion of their own culture, should help these indigenous inhabitants by their knowledge, abilities and technical progress to escape from a continually deepening life crisis.

### **KEY WORDS**

Inuit culture - culture - survive - environment - indigenous

### **INTRODUCTION**

A greater part of the circumpolar territories which are in the naturalists' sphere of interest, is also inhabited by people. They may be the indigenous or people who came of their own free will or otherwise. The people came to adapt to the surrounding natural conditions in the places they had eventually settled on. They had no other option if they wanted to survive. They were forced to find food, solve the problem of habitation and conservation of their kind. All these are the basic needs of an animal species. The people had to act in harmony with the surrounding nature, otherwise they would not survive. Every divergence could be a reason for losing a life. It is evident that ensuring the basic needs in tropical regions differs from that in Arctic ones. In parallel with ensuring the basic needs, complexes of rules, systems and norms were created and evolved. The whole system of organization and development of human society, materialised in the results of physical and brainwork is called a culture, which simultaneously expresses the unity of man with nature and society and creates a background for identity.

We can divide a culture into material and spiritual. The material culture covers the whole area of material activity including its results such as work tools, dwellings, objects of daily use, clothes etc. The spiritual culture includes the consciousness and the spiritual creativity arising out of it, such as for example understanding, morality, education, religion.

Canadian Eskimos - the Inuit - have during the long period between their arrival more than ten thousand years ago and their movement along the whole shore of the North American continent from Alaska to Greenland gradually created a culture that is admirable. The members of this ethnic group have solved the basic problem of surviving in glacial conditions with ingenuity and brilliancy. In an environment where the ice rules for nine months a year, where there is no verdure, where the sources of food and materials are limited, despite of all this they have created a culture which ensures life. A culture that was all the more tightly united with nature, the harsher nature was. Any mistake or deviation from the settled rules or social norms created by this culture was paid for by life. That is why observance of these rules and norms was a necessity.

The Arctic region inhabited by the Inuit seems to be uninhabitable from our point of view. The parts situated furthest to the North, such as Ellesmere Island and parts of the North-Western Baffin Island are covered by glaciers, the other territory is formed by the rock desert which is found on all the small islands of the Central Arctic and Ellesmere Island. Vegetation grows only on areas that are geomorphologically, microclimatically, hydrologically and pedologically more suitable than the inhospitable environs. The vegetation cover, as regards its area and number of species, increases towards the South. Vegetation grows on the only few decimetres of active layer which manages to thaw during the brief summer. But under it the permafrost persists - in most of the regions tens of hundred metres thick. The surface of the high Arctic tundra is also formed by great areas of freshwater wetlands, because water from the thawing ice and snow has nowhere to escape. Substantial areas are covered by lakes and water-courses.

The vegetation cover constitutes tundra which has many forms. On the extremely inhospitable biotopes there prevails lichens tundra with many species of lichens (e.g. species of the genus *Cladonia*, *Cetraria* etc.). Moister biotopes are mostly covered by moss tundra. Where the natural conditions are even more favourable we can find small shrub tundra with *Empetrum* (crowberry), *Vaccinium* (bilberry), *Dryas* (mountain avens), *Cassiope* (white heather), dwarf willows (e.g. *Salix reticulata*, *S. arctica* and others). Bushes (*Betula nana*, *B. glandulosa* and bush forms of willows) grow on the most favourable biotopes. Occurrence of cotton grass (*Eriophorum scheuchzeri* above all) is characteristic of wetlands. Despite the extreme climatic conditions, the tundra vegetation is comparatively very rich with species and it is used by the Inuit for different purposes. The young leaves and buds of several species of willow are collected for food and have been found to be exceptionally rich in vitamin C. Even more richness on vitamin C is in raw of big animals - that was the reason why Inuit never suffer from scorbout.

Big sea animals are, for example, *Balaena mysticetus* (Greenland bowhead whale), *Delphinapterus leucas* (white whale), *Monodon monoceros* (narwhal), *Odoboenus rosmarus* (walrus), *Phoca hispida* (ringed seal), *Erignathus barbatus* (bearded seal), *Pagophilus groenlandica* (harp seal).

Among exploitable fish can be found, for example, *Boreogadus saida* (Arctic cod), *Gadus morhua* (Atlantic cod), *Gadus ogac* (Greenland cod), *Salvelinus alpinus* (Arctic char), *Salvelinus namaycush* (lake trout).

One of the biggest animals is, above all, *Ovibos moschatus* (musk ox) found on many of the Arctic islands, and on the mainland at Thelon Sanctuary. The others are *Thalarctos maritimus* (polar bear),

*Rangifer arcticus* (barren-ground cariboo), *Gulo gulo* (wolverine) and smaller animals such as *Alopex lagopus* (Arctic fox), *Lepus arcticus* (Arctic hare), *Mustela erminea* (weasel), *Lemmus trimucronatus* (brown lemming), *Citellus parryi* (squirrel).

Bird species are mainly *Lagopus mutus* (rock ptarmigan), *Chen hyperborea* (snow goose), *Gavia stellata* (red-throated loon), *Corvus corax* (raven), *Nyctea scandiaca* (snowy owl).

Many cultures were created by the Eskimos in the course of a long period. Far from all of them have been explored. The most famous of them are the Dorset and Thule cultures. An important Canadian archeologist, Diamond Jenness, found in 1925 near the settlement of Cape Dorset on the South-Eastern coast of Baffin Island remainders of a civilisation flourishing there between the years 1000 B.C. and 1200 A.D. and he named it the Dorset culture. People of this culture had evolved highly specialised hunting techniques as their culture was based on the hunting of big sea animals. The Thula culture, which followed and very probably assimilated the Dorset culture, did not last so long, that is until the time of the first contacts with Europeans. An entirely different culture was created by the Eskymo ethnic group which is supposed to have separated from the main stream and followed the cariboo droves moving inland. This economy was based on fishing and cariboo hunting on the inland lakes. People of this culture had no contact with the coast and no possibility of becoming familiar with sea animals or, consequently, hunting them. These regions had enough bushes for making fires.

During the Dorset culture era the Eskimos improved all the objects of material culture to such a level that they persisted until the white man's arrival on their territory.

We find mainly kayaks among these objects, used by all the Eskimo groups exclusively for summer hunting of big sea animals. The umiaks were used for transporting people. Both these boats were made of driftwood and seal and walrus skins. The sledges of different types, shod with whalebone, ivory or jawbones of a whale and back formed by deer's antlers with the skull attached. Harpoons with separable heads of such materials as wood, bone, ivory or narwhal horns, different types of hooks for pulling out seals, lances and special kind of spears for fishing, bows and arrows, knives, snow knives and special women's knives called ulu for preparation of skins, old types of stone scrapers and a lot of other important small things necessary for a successful hunt, the ways and techniques of which evolved on the basis of perfect knowledge of animal behaviour.

The material culture also includes snow houses of ingenious construction, beds formed with pieces of wood covered with a thick layer of shrubs and numerous heavy deerskins. Fireplaces consisted of a stone lamp made of soapstone in the shape of a segment of circle. The whole vessel was filled with blubber as high as the wick consisting of hair from *Eriophorum*, *Cassiope tetragona* or dried moss. In summer they used tents. The framework consisted of whalebone or wooden poles covered by sealskins.

Clothing of Eskimos such as men's and women's trousers, jackets, outer garments, boots and stockings, were made of seal or cariboo skins, depending on the type of garment. The skins were either with hair worn inside or outside, or without, of young or adult animals, depending on the required weight and softness. Stockings and the first clothes of new-born children were of birdskin with feathers being worn next to the body. A special garment up to our days is the woman's jacket amautiq - with large hood for holding a child and a very broad tail or flap behind. All clothing was cut entirely with the woman's knife and sewn with deer sinews by women in their dwellings illuminated by lamps.

This is only a small sample of enumeration of artefacts for reference and a general impression.

The spiritual culture includes the sphere of consciousness and the way of thinking arising from it, morality, religion and also the hierarchy of values, behaviour, education, mutual relations and, last but not least - art. Here I would like to call attention only to some outstanding singularities such as, for example, to the fact that on the Arctic coast of Canada, Eskimo groups never engaged in inter-group war. The ethic of the Arctic hunter was one of peace and understanding. However, all Eskimo groups lived permanently in a state of war with the neighbouring Indian tribes to the South. By the way, the name Eskimo comes from their language and means "raw meat eaters". The name of Inuit, today used exclusively on the North American continent, originates from Eskimo language Inuktitut and means "the people".

An individual becomes a relation not only by birth or marriage, but also by receiving a name and by adoption. Adoption is widely spread in all the Eskimo groups and lasts till present times. The child remains not only in relationship with his original family concerning terminology and behaviour, but also becomes a relation of the new family. The children and parents visit each other and the parents treat their children the same as the adoptive ones. The adoption is in most cases realised because of friendship or for the purpose of the relationship bonds. Infanticide, the habit of getting rid of a newborn female child, was mainly in the regions where gaining food was very difficult. Where the living conditions were more favourable, this habit was not known at all.

Wisdom is highly valued, adolescence is considered a process of gaining wisdom. Any demonstration of emotion, love or other feelings shown outwardly is considered undignified. The ability of self-control is highly appreciated. This arises from a conviction that a morose person can harm others by the force of his wicked thoughts. For the same reason they tend to accommodate the wishes of other people to avoid an accumulation of dissatisfaction and prevent them from damaging others. Independence has a high value, too. The adults want to be self-supporting and not an subject of solicitude and pity. Feelings towards the adults should not be demonstrated as they could give an impression of dependence and pity. The independence of thoughts and deeds is protected as a natural privilege. Anybody who tries to tell them what to do or how to think is consequently treated with distrust. This is also connected with the absence of a formal leader.

## CONCLUSION

I believe and I am seriously convinced that the Western civilisation and culture with their highly developed technology owes greater attention to all the indigenous inhabitants who were so fatally struck and negatively affected by them. Scientific circles should thus concentrate their investigation on an unambiguous objective to reduce the disharmony between nature and the indigenous way of life, which came about by our fault.

Because of immensely fast cultural changes the indigenous population suffers socio-cultural and psychological changes, which lead to deterioration and can result in a total destruction of the whole ethnic group. Even now the indigenous inhabitants are struggling between their own culture and the new one.

It is necessary to evolve a worldwide endeavour, based on cooperation of scientists and governments, to save at least partially the culture of the indigenous inhabitants. As said above, culture represents a background for identity and not only that of the Inuit, but of every human individual.

That is why I appeal to the scientists to bear in mind, when preparing projects and planning research work, the possibility of making the best of the results of their investigations for the aims above explained. To think in broader context and unify different scientific branches, including the

humanities, in such a way that the acquired results would help to solve the conservation of a good quality of life of the indigenous inhabitants and their culture. (I do not even mention the possible reverse influence upon the so-called western cultures which are quickly losing the basic human values.) The scientists should try to publish the results of their research in a form more amenable to the wide public and thus help towards a better knowledge of usually inaccessible regions. I consider it the only way that might lead to conservation of the last remainders of the indigenous cultures.

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